

# The History of Judaism

By Colleen Messina

The Jewish people have faced severe persecution during their long history, but they have also demonstrated great strength. Judaism began about 3,500 years ago. Abraham, the first Jew, was a respectable 99 years old at the time. It is believed that God made a covenant with Abraham that Abraham's descendents would reach the "Promised Land" in exchange for their worship and obedience. Abraham believed in one God rather than many idols. Judaism became a major world religion. It is at the heart of both Christianity and Islam.

Abraham lived in present-day Iraq in 1800 B.C. His son, Isaac, and his grandson, Jacob, also became patriarchs of Judaism. Jacob's twelve sons became the leaders of the 12 tribes of Israel. Their complicated story fills the Hebrew Bible, which is the Old Testament to Christians. Even Disney has made movies about Bible stories!

The story goes that the Hebrews went to Egypt because of a famine and later became Pharaoh's slaves. By 1200 B.C., the Pharaoh worried that the Hebrew people might rebel. He ordered his thugs to throw all Hebrew boys into the Nile! One boy's mother saved him by placing him in a covered basket in the river. Pharaoh's daughter rescued the baby, and she named him "Moses." This name means "one who was drawn out," and the story of Moses is a well-known Bible story.



Moses rejected his royal family when he grew up. Pharaoh was Moses' adopted grandfather so this must have taken great courage. Moses asked the Pharaoh to free the Hebrew slaves. Pharaoh said no, so God sent ten nasty plagues to the Egyptians. The Nile turned to blood, hoards of frogs hopped over the land, billions of bugs bothered the Egyptians, and then all the people got boils. With the death of all firstborn sons, including his own, the Pharaoh finally let his slaves go, but soon changed his mind and sent his soldiers after the Israelites. According to the Bible, the Red Sea split into walls of water. The Israelites escaped to Canaan, but the Pharaoh's soldiers never were able to "catch a wave" and died in the attempt. This exodus was only one of many that Jews had to make at different times in their history.

The Israelites faced new problems in Canaan. The Canaanites worshiped idols, but the Israelites formed a powerful kingdom under King David around 1000 B.C. His son, Solomon, built the first temple in Jerusalem. Unfortunately, under Solomon the Israelites split into two kingdoms who fought against each other. In spite of the violence in their lives, the Jews had one great triumph during this time. All of their holy writings were collected into one book called the Talmud in 500 B.C.

Later, the Roman Empire conquered much of the known world. Romans took over Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple in 70 A.D. Since Jerusalem could no longer be the center of their life, Jews were scattered. Persecution of the Jews became a theme in their existence.

As a people, Jews continued to face challenges. Christians were hostile toward Jews during the Middle Ages because they blamed the Jews for Jesus' death. In some countries, Jews were forced to wear clothes that had an image of the stone tablets or the Star of David sewn onto them. Officials made Jews pay extra taxes. Jews even had to wear pointed or bell-shaped hats as a disgrace. By the 11th century, Christians wanted to rescue the Holy land from the Muslims, so the crusades began. The Christians killed both Jews and Muslims. Many people of different faiths have died in religious wars.

Another group of Jews emerged called the Kabbalah movement in 1200 A.D. Most major religions have a group of believers who want to discover the inner meaning of their faith, and Kabbalists were Jewish mystics. Kabbalists believed in an alternate view of the world based on the Torah. They believe in 10 attributes of God, such as love, wisdom, power, intelligence, and beauty. They called these attributes the *sefirot*. They secretly passed on their ideas by word of mouth. Later, Kabbalists wrote these ideas in a book called the *Zohar*.



Other groups of Jews emerged in different countries between the 16th and the 18th centuries. Ashkenazim Jews lived in central and eastern Europe. Sephardim Jews lived in Spain and Portugal, but locals expelled them in 1492. These two groups have the same basic beliefs, but their food, music, and dances are different. Jews formed their own communities in England, Italy, France, and the Netherlands. Amsterdam was tolerant of Jews, and Jewish merchants became expert bankers, overseas traders, and businessmen in this thriving center for international trade. About 500,000 Jews also lived in Poland by the mid-16th century.

However, Poland did not remain a safe haven for Jews. In the 18th century, Poland was conquered by Russia, Austria, and Prussia. Jews were forced to live in exile in a place called the Pale of Settlement. They had no rights or freedom of movement. One Russian Czar, Alexander II, gave the Jews more leeway, but his assassination led to many attacks on the Jews. These attacks were called "pogroms." Thousands of Jews ran away in terror.

The majority of Jews lived in Europe by 1800, but many started to emigrate to the United States, South Africa, New Zealand, and Australia. As anti-Semitism, or anti-Jewish sentiment, increased in Europe, many Jews emigrated between 1932 and 1939. The rise of Hitler in Germany during World War II became a nightmare for the Jewish people. Nazi soldiers destroyed Jewish homes and synagogues. At least six million Jews were killed in the Holocaust. This has left a scar on humanity that has never healed.

A young Jewish girl named Anne Frank gave the world a poignant view of life during Nazi persecution. She was four when her parents fled Germany to escape Hitler's anti-Jewish policies. Her family went to Amsterdam and hid in an annex above her father's business. Anne kept a journal about her experiences, but unfortunately, the Nazis discovered her family. She died in a concentration camp. She wrote, "If I just think of how we live here, I usually come to the conclusion that it is a paradise compared with how other Jews who are not in hiding must be living." Anne's diary has given many people a greater understanding of a terrible period in Jewish history.

Even though Hitler killed one third of the world's Jewish population, the Jews rallied again and demonstrated the amazing strength of their people. World War II ended in May of 1945. The Jewish people wanted a place of their own, so they created the state of Israel in 1948. Jews have made their mark in many fields.

Jews have made major contributions in spite of the prejudice they have experienced. Marc Chagall came from a devout Jewish Russian family and became an amazing painter. One of the greatest violin virtuosos was a Jewish man named Yehudi Menuhin. He became famous for his technical and interpretive abilities. Albert Einstein revolutionized physics, and Sigmund Freud changed psychoanalysis.

Today, not all of the world's twelve million Jews follow the same tradition. Orthodox Judaism upholds the strictest interpretation of Jewish law. Conservative and Liberal Judaism have outlawed dietary restrictions and the exclusive use of Hebrew in their services. However, at the heart of Jewish tradition is their first commandment, which says, "Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might." (Deuteronomy 6:4)

## The History of Judaism

### Questions

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- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Which religions came from Judaism?
- A. Scientology and Wicca
  - B. Taoism and Shintoism
  - C. Zoroastrianism and Buddhism
  - D. Islam and Christianity

Name \_\_\_\_\_



Date \_\_\_\_\_

- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Which country was the "Promised Land?"
- A. America
  - B. Iraq
  - C. Canada
  - D. Canaan
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Which city is central to the Jewish faith?
- A. New York
  - B. Paris
  - C. Mecca
  - D. Jerusalem
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Which phrase best describes anti-Semitism?
- A. anti-orthodox
  - B. anti-Jewish
  - C. anti-establishment
  - D. anti-Christian
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Which word is a synonym for "pogrom"?
- A. pummel
  - B. convince
  - C. attack
  - D. pursue
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. How many Jews were killed in the Holocaust?
- A. 600
  - B. 60,000
  - C. 6,000
  - D. 6,000,000
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. Which country is the Jewish homeland?
- A. Iraq
  - B. Israel
  - C. Afghanistan
  - D. Iran
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. Which of the following IS NOT a form of Judaism today?
- A. Liberal
  - B. Orthodox
  - C. Conformist
  - D. Conservative

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